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## Influencing Fairtrade Consumption Through Servant Leadership: Bruce Crowther's Story

### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study expands our understanding of Servant Leadership beyond organisational boundaries by making an examination of its role in the establishment and growth of a social movement.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper's findings are developed from four sequential, semi-structured interviews and a narrated tour of Garstang with the founder of the Fairtrade Towns Movement. It follows a theoretical framework of servant leadership from Spears (1996; 2009). Evidence is gathered through in depth investigation of the activities of Bruce Crowther, the architect and driving force behind the Fairtrade Towns initiative.

**Findings:** The findings discover how servant leadership operates in a social, place-based setting to influence Fairtrade consumption. The paper argues the success of the Fairtrade Towns Movement is linked to Bruce Crowther's leadership. The findings presented draw and expand upon Spears' ten characteristics of servant leadership. Utilisation of this framework sees Crowther emerge as a servant leader operating at a community level to influence Fairtrade consumption via the Fairtrade Towns Movement.

**Originality/value:** The paper makes a contribution to theory by identifying the novel characteristic of Servant Leaders that is *exploring affinity* and proffers it as an extension of Spears framework. It also provides valuable information about the impact and importance of Servant Leadership in the efficacious advance of ethical consumerism.

**Keywords:** Fairtrade, Servant Leadership, Ethical leadership, Exploring Affinity, Ethical Consumption

## Introduction

Fairtrade (FT) has emerged from the outposts of the 'alternative' to become a mainstream staple of normative consumption (Doherty, *et al.*, 2013). Globally its market share in 2015 was reported to be worth over £6.25 billion, assisting 1.6 million farmers and workers across 75 countries (Fairtrade Annual Report, 2016). In the UK alone FT sales in 2015 were valued at £1.6 billion, with nine out of ten consumers indicating that they recognised the FT label (Fairtrade Impact, 2016).

FT research during this period has examined the commercial success of FT that has been achieved through consumer-led marketing strategies, improvements in product quality, the use of branding, distinctive labelling and the expansion of distribution via large retail outlets such as supermarkets (White and Samuel, 2016; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). However, its growth in popularity has not always been sustained, as the example of Cafe Direct has indicated (Davies *et al.*, 2010), and the message that FT represents is not always an easy one to communicate clearly (Golding, 2009). Research has also explored the multiple motivations for FT consumption, including ethical, sustainable and political perspectives. For example, the work of Low and Davenport (2009) recognises FT consumption as sustainable, ethical and political, expressed through consumers '*shopping for a better world*', while Golding and Peattie (2005) and De Pelsmacker *et al.*, (2007) identify FT as a model of sustainable consumption.

The FT literature has tended to be dominated by consumption-led studies that tend to think in terms of buyer behaviour motives, attitudes, beliefs and purchasing patterns. For example, the discovery that consumers are willing to pay more for FT products even during times of recession (Bondy and Talwar, 2011) and Nicholls and Lee's (2006) suggestion that FT needs to develop brands that are capable of building a positive identity within the children's market. It is only relatively recently that FT studies have begun to draw upon the agency of 'place' in influencing FT consumption, in particular, the success of Fairtrade Towns (FTT) in the USA

and the UK in influencing consumers, retailers, and public and private organisations to stock and consume FT products (Malpass, *et al.*, 2007; Samuel and Emanuel, 2012; Peattie and Samuel, 2015; Samuel and Peattie, 2016).

Contemporary research has only just begun to recognise the important role that individuals play in the emergence and growth of social movements but their specific contribution remains poorly understood (Kurland and McCaffrey, 2016). To date, research has not considered the role of individuals in promulgating the FT message and growing its success. This paper aims to address that gap by undertaking an examination of Bruce Crowther, the founder and ethical leader of the FTT movement, who has been credited with aiding FT's global rise in consumer awareness and consumption.

### **Bruce Crowther**

Bruce Crowther, described as a 'Fairtrade legend' (Lamb 2008), is cited by many for his significant contribution to advancing the FT movement via his tenacity to cultivate and lead FTTs into a global phenomenon. For example, Lamb (2008) attributes the FTT movement's conception and global success as an inspired case of community activism 'led' by the 'charismatic' Oxfam campaigner Bruce Crowther. Yet, despite this recognition and his unquestionable success in developing FT markets, until now his contribution to FT has remained the property of stories in newspaper articles and magazine features such as *The Guardian* (2007, 2008). His contribution to community development and FT through the FTT movement also featured in the former UK Prime Minister Brown's (2008) book *'Britain's Everyday Heroes'* and during the same year he received an MBE for his services to FT and Oxfam.

In November 2001, the Fairtrade Foundation launched the Fairtrade Town (FTT) initiative conceptualised by Crowther and inaugurated by Harriet Lamb, the Director of the Fairtrade

Foundation, who presented Garstang with the official accreditation of a Fairtrade Town (Garstang Fairtrade History, 2009). From humble beginnings in Garstang in 2002 the initiative was recognised as *'one of Britain's most active grassroots social movements'* (Kelly, 2008) and by 2007 the number of accredited FTTs had reached well over two hundred (Allen, 2007). Over a short period of time, it has experienced rapid global growth incorporating places such as San Francisco and Kumamoto in Japan into its portfolio. Presently the number of accredited FTTs in the UK stands at 619 with a further 1211 spread across the globe, with the USA boasting 44, Turkey 9, Australia 8 and Sweden 67 (Fairtrade Towns, 2016). Each of these towns is required to follow the five requirements (co-created between Crowther, Garstang and the Fairtrade Foundation) listed below:

1. The local council must pass a resolution supporting Fairtrade, and serve Fairtrade coffee and tea at its meetings, in offices and canteens.
2. A range of Fairtrade products must be available in the town's or city's shops and served in local cafés and catering establishments (targets are set according to population).
3. Fairtrade products must be used by a number of local work places (estate agents, hairdressers etc) and community organisations (churches, schools etc).
4. The council must attract popular support for the campaign.
5. A local Fairtrade steering group must be convened to ensure continued commitment to Fairtrade status.

(Fairtrade Towns 2016)

Given that the FTT movement's conception and global success has been largely attributed to the leadership of Crowther, his proven ability to lead in a community context presents a unique opportunity to develop our understanding of ethical leadership operating outside organisations' boundaries. A school of leadership research with strong synergistic links to

ethical leadership and ethical consumption is Servant Leadership (SLship), given its intrinsic links to ethics, virtue, morality and the desire to serve others (Greenleaf, 1977; Parris and Peachey, 2013). By conceptualising Crowther as a SL this paper attempts to broaden our insights into the ‘ethical, moral and virtuous’ practices of SL. It also seeks to address Parris and Peachey’s (2013) call to advance empirical limitations in SL research by expanding its application beyond the development of employee performance and organisational leadership (Grisaffe *et al.*, 2016) and examine its outcomes in a voluntary/ societal setting. Thus the paper explores the SLship activities of Crowther, with the view that key insights from his lived experiences can offer novel contributions to further our understanding of ethical leadership that have built a social movement by successfully bridging business with society.

## **SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

Leaders and leadership may take many ‘classical’ forms (see for example Gandolfi and Stone 2017 and Sudha *et al.*, 2016) and includes more obscure types such as mavens (Feick and Price, 1987), nudgers (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) and opinion leaders (Rogers, 1962). ‘Ethical Leadership’ has become a subject of great interest for scholars and practitioners concerned with improving relationships between business and society (Lawton and Paez, 2015) and developing tomorrow’s ethical business leaders (Hicks and Waddock, 2016). Leaders who’s ethical character, stewardship, experience, wisdom and dignity can help organisations’ systematic transition to business principles and practices that embrace the triple bottom line of sustainability (Throop and Mayberry, 2017).

Nurturing appropriate, ethical leadership style has been linked to improving employee trust and behaviour (Mo and Shi, 2017; Bedi Alpaslan and Green, 2016), fostering organisational citizenship behaviour (Bonner Greenbaum and Mayer, 2016) and can positively affect firm performance (Hicks and Waddock, 2016; Shin *et al.*, 2015). However, acting and leading

ethically is not a simple undertaking since, in an organisational setting, it can result in perceptions of poorer performance compared to those that act and lead with the institution's own best interests in mind (Letwin *et al.*, 2016).

Many perceptions of leaders and leadership are rooted in the notion that they are self-serving to the point of being morally and ethically bereft (Hill 2017). Servant Leadership (SLship) however, pertains to an approach that is ethically and morally sound and driven by a desire to serve and benefit others (Parris and Peachey 2013, Greenleaf 1977). In these respects, the role of the leader of an environmentally, morally or ethically motivated movement, that is, one that is not primarily concerned with a capitalist accumulation of wealth, can be seen to be one that is commensurate with the concept of SLship. FT, for instance, seeks a similar outcome that is to serve society, individuals, organisations or the environment through the process of caring at a distance and consuming products and services that are deemed ethical or sustainable (Barnett et al. 2011): Northouse (2015, p240) in fact states that SL differs from the majority of leadership theories in that it is “*the only leadership approach that frames the leadership process around the caring for others*”. Consuming products that carry the FT label serves the economic and social well-being of FT producers' communities while consuming services that are provided by social enterprises provide communities or vulnerable groups with economic and social support (Doherty Haugh and Lyon 2014). Ultimately, while many ‘traditional’ theories of leaders and leadership focus upon the process or skills of leadership (Bass, 1990), or the power relations that exist within hierarchies of leadership, along with its concrete and emergent forms (Northouse, 2015), SL is concerned with the behaviours of the leader. This is an apposite approach for this study that adopts the individual leader, Bruce Crowther, as the unit of analysis.

### ***Servant Leadership as the Research Lens***

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Despite Greenleaf's significant contribution to SL theory, he appears to have chosen not to leave us with an empirically validated definition (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This has given rise to many interpretations of what constitutes a SL (Spears, 1996; Russell *et al.*, 1999) and much research has attempted to identify the characteristics and behaviours of SLs. Second, only to Greenleaf, Spears (1996, 2009) has emerged as an influential SL theorist. His ten characteristics of SLs, discussed below, are recognised as "*the essential elements of servant leadership*" (Van Dierendonck 2011:1231) and have informed many subsequent studies:

***Listening.*** Listening to others allows servant leaders to understand followers and ensures they serve their needs. Supporting this characteristic, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) highlight the link between listening skills and the emergence of new SLs while Wong and Davey (2007), highlight the ability for servant leaders to consult and take on board the views of others.

***Empathy.*** Servant leaders have an ability to see the world through the perspective of others allowing them to understand how people think and feel. This is suggested to strengthen the relationship between the leader and followers (Northouse, 2015). Such empathy Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) argue develops an 'altruistic calling' i.e. a desire to help others fulfil their potential.

***Healing.*** Developing upon the characteristics of *Listening* and *Empathy*, servant-leaders are recognised for their concern for individuals' wellness and personal development (Wong and Davey, 2007, and Laub, 1999). An awareness of personal difficulties faced by others can allow the servant leader to target help and support and show genuine concern for others.

***Awareness.*** The SL uses their wisdom, dignity and experience to know their own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of others (Gini and Green, 2014, and Hicks and Waddock, 2016). Such a holistic awareness is coined today as emotional intelligence (Goldman, 1995).



**Persuasion.** Maintaining harmonious relationships without the overt use of title, rank or position draws on the other characteristics of SL namely empathy, healing and listening so that others feel valued and part of the group or the community (Laub, 1999).

**Conceptualisation.** The SL will be adept at communicating a vision by balancing conceptual thinking with operational needs and being able to use examples in order to present a vision in a way that inspires others (Wong and Davey, 2007). The vision of a SL will include a holistic perspective on long-term objectives benefitting from the ability to ‘stand back’ (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011).

**Foresight.** Northouse (2015) acknowledges Greenleaf’s belief that foresight has an ethical dimension and responsibility to any reasonably foreseeable failings. According to Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), a SL will have wisdom and the ability to use foresight to view the future as something that may be shaped by those who participate and those who are consulted and involved (Throop and Mayberry, 2017, and Hicks and Waddock, 2016,).

**Stewardship.** Taking responsibility to lead and serve others, and to hold the organisation in trust for the benefit of society, requires a SL to have the courage and accept culpability as they commit to leading others as purported by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011).

**Commitment to the growth of people.** Empowering and actively developing people with a view to influencing and inspiring them would see a SL offering transformational influence and support to followers Laub (1999); Sendjaya Sarros and Santora (2008). Such an overt commitment to caring about and investing time in people would then engender levels of trust associated with SLs (Hicks and Waddock 2016, and Dennis and Bocarnea, 2005).

**Building Community.** A servant leader fosters and nurtures the community to ensure it is a place where people can feel safe and connected and gain the benefits of such safety and social

interaction. Demonstrating authenticity and a genuine concern for building relationships is a feature of SL which helps to realise tangible gains and promote community development (Laub, 1999). For example, Throop and Mayberry (2017) suggest that leading organisations to build collaborative values has a role to play in their smooth transition to become more ethical and sustainable.

By examining Bruce Crowther through the lens of Spears (1996) ten characteristics of SLs this paper attempts to gain insight into those factors that have been influential in fostering the success of the FTT movement. In doing so it addresses calls to advance the empirical limitations in SL research beyond the fields of the development of employee performance (Parris and Peachey, 2013) and organisational leadership (Grisaffe *et al.*, 2016), by expanding its application into a voluntary/societal setting.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts an interpretivist stance, based upon data about Bruce Crowther's social situation, views, motives, interactions, interpretations and everyday actions in order to explore the world through his eyes (Samuel and Peattie, 2016, and Blaikie, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data capturing instrument to provide the flexibility to explore interesting and emergent themes of discussion. The interview questions were operationalised according to Spears (1996) ten characteristics of SLs and were open-ended to inform the general lines of enquiry (Charmaz, 2006, and Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The fieldwork began with a one-to-one three hour narrated tour of the town of Garstang with Bruce Crowther during which extensive field notes were collated (Paolisso and Hames, 2010). Following this, three interviews were conducted over a period of three days (comprising six hours of interviewing time) that the lead researcher remained in residence at Garstang. These interviews were conducted to explore the detailed background of Bruce Crowther, the town of

Garstang and the FT movement in addition to exploring the ten characteristics of SLs. Adopting a role that is deeply embedded within the research context affords advantages that arguably cannot be achieved by other approaches, as Vinten (1994, p.30) states, “*by being immersed in the events in progress, the researcher hopes to be in a position to obtain much more information and a greater depth of knowledge than would be possible from the outside looking in*”. Furthermore, the use of informal conversation and observation is valuable in capturing rich, contextualized data and gaining insight into the subject of investigation (Fetterman, 2010; Rabinow and Sullivan, 1988). The final interview (two hours) was conducted nine weeks later in order to probe emergent lines of enquiry and to member validate the preliminary interpretations of the data (Sandelowski, 1993).

Data analysis was performed using cyclic thematic indexing (Guest et al. 2012, Braun and Clarke 2006). Interview transcripts and field notes were colour-coded to indicate discussions and issues that pertained to the structure of Spears (1996) ten characteristics of SL. Preliminary analyses were used to develop and refine further interview questions. The cyclic identification and pursuit of emergent lines of enquiry are one of the key strengths of interpretive inquiry (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006).

## **Findings and Discussion**

Utilising the SL characteristic of *listening* to facilitate FT consumption, Crowther recognises the importance of sharing beliefs with other people. Listening in FTTs has appeared to have happened on three levels comprising producer to producer, producer to consumer and consumer to consumer. For example, in Garstang, Crowther encouraged local farmers to listen to the plight and concerns of Ghanaian cocoa farmers. These cocoa farmers were also listened to by school children, community groups, students and religious institutions during FTT events. At a consumer to consumer level, FTTs have created an environment where consumers can

comfortably share their concerns, seek answers and learn confidently from each other. FTTs have subsequently been recognised as listening arenas where consumers learn more about ethical consumption. Just as Chan and Mak (2013) suggest SL facilitates congruent working relationships between leaders and subordinates. Our findings indicate SL in the context of FT consumption has also manifested itself in congruent relationships between domestic and international producers, producers and their consumers and consumers and fellow consumers. Such congruence appears to be key to developing a dual confidence in consumers, namely through the advocacy and purchase of FT products:

*'I hear Lancashire dairy farmers saying to me they don't want subsidies. They want to be paid a fair price for their goods. I go to Ghana and I hear farmers saying they don't want charity and they don't want handouts. It's the same thing. By listening to each other they can share each other's stories. Just give them a fair price for their stuff it's as simple as that.'*

A key aspect of **empathy** in SL theory is related to the acceptance and understanding of others. At an operational level understanding the needs of others (consumers) and improving attitudes to the developmental performance (Van Dierendonck 2011) of FT consumption was a driving force in Crowther's FTT leadership. By anticipating the availability and price barriers to purchasing and consuming FT goods, Crowther set about making FT "easy to do". FTTs, Crowther suggests, made buying tea, coffee, sugar etc. very simple through increasing supply outlets both for micro (personal) and meso (institutional) level consumption. However, conceptually, **empathy** has a greater significance in FT consumption as consumers are asked to empathise with the poverty of producer communities when making their purchasing decisions. Thus it is possible to conceive that SL **empathy** takes responsibility for improving relationships between consumers and developing world producers as they are invited to **heal** the problems of distant others through the simple act of consumption (Bartlett et al. 2011). The

role of **healing** for the SL is thus determined by a trusted foresight that **conceptualises** the positive impacts of FTTs and individual FT consumption and establishes the tangible outcomes it has had upon the lives of distant others:

*'To go to somewhere like Peru, and being able to speak to the farmers about what Fairtrade Towns are doing, and then at the end of the presentation, for them to stand up and applause, that's what means more than any amount of awards or recognition, to know that you're actually having an impact, because when those producers are clapping and are applauding and standing beside you, you know you're having an impact, because they wouldn't be with you, if you weren't having an impact, and that is the biggest thing.'*

Contributing to the **healing** of producer communities is subsequently suggested to help generate greater consumer engagement and trust in the Fairtrade Foundation and the sustainability/CSR agenda of the brands and organisations that carry its label (Van Dierendonck 2011, White and Samuel 2016). In Crowther's words, this is akin to a friendship where **empathy** is displayed and **healing** is carried out across social, economic and geographical divides. All through the act of FT consumption:

*'Solidarity has almost become a dirty word these days and to me, there's nothing stronger than people supporting each other, it's not about politics, it's about people supporting each other, and that was really exciting to know that we are working with our friends together across the world. It's not the big things it's the little things, it's people doing a day's work then coming home and writing a letter to their MP or going out on a Saturday to promote Fairtrade or even just making sure when possible they choose Fairtrade.'*

SL is suggested to *persuade* others into doing or contributing through ‘convincement’ not ‘cohesion’ (Spears, 1996) thus generating a better chance of participatory consumption and commitment to the cause (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2014). At the early stages of the FTT movement, Crowther adopted a persuasive technique that encouraged a collective prototypical commitment to FT from the ‘whole community’ of Garstang. In the History of Garstang, the World’s First FTT (2016) he tells the story of his ‘convincement’ campaign that gave birth to the Global FTT movement of today. Crowther’s early inspiration was the paradoxical nature of a coffee morning he attended at his local church. He stresses that the coffee mornings raise money for projects in the developing world, but rather absurdly, use coffee from multinational organisations that pay growers in the same countries a ‘pittance’ (Crowther; cited in Lamb 2008). This event helped clarify his idea of convincing organisations and groups that they could make a significant contribution to producer communities in developing countries through FT consumption occurring on their site. In an attempt to *persuade* organisations such as churches, businesses, schools, etc. to use and or sell FT products, Crowther and the Oxfam Group organised a FT meal at a prominent local restaurant in the centre of Garstang. The meal was attended by the Mayor, head teachers, clergy, traders and farmers' representatives who in the main began to take an interest in making Garstang a place where FT consumption was made easy. Subsequently, under Crowther’s leadership, the community began to operate as a team that systematically lobbied local retail outlets, organisations and public services in the town of Garstang, to stock and consume FT products (Alexander and Nicholls, 2006). This form of community level persuasion resulted in over 90% of Garstang’s commercial and other organisation premises committing to a FT pledge. It is therefore suggested that SL application at a community or even a team based level can have a positive impact upon advancing FT consumption at an individual, institution and community level. These findings echo the work of Schaubroeck *et al.*, (2011) who suggest that teams are more effective when they operate

under SL. Thus, perhaps we should consider a SL ‘team’ approach (consisting of different community stakeholders) as better placed than mainstream marketing communication to influence FT consumption? As Crowther stated:

*‘It’s about empowering people here, you know things like that first meeting in the restaurant you know where people there voted to become a Fairtrade Town, that’s empowerment, that’s local democracy, and that’s what it’s about. The strength of Fairtrade Towns is it’s a people movement, it’s about the community coming together to change things.’*

Crowther indicates that ‘each community has to do what is special for their community’ if it is to successfully make a contribution to FT. Whilst Spears (1996) identifies that SLs are able to **build a community** from individuals working for the same institution, Crowther, it could be argued, built a similar community dedicated to FT promotion and consumption. In stretching the boundaries of the SL community concept his ‘institution’ became Garstang the place and his ‘individuals working for the institution’ became the institutions (public, private, Charity, NGO, religious etc.) and individuals from within that town (Samuel and Peattie, 2015). His tenacity to understand the importance of linking these groups is identified by Alexander and Nicholls (2006) who posit that Crowther’s entrepreneurial activism in linking the various collective social constructs of a place to the FT movement came from his understanding and respect for the social connections that existed within Garstang. Crowther’s SL community was subsequently built from a **foresight** that collective consumption by organisations and groups could make a significant contribution to FT promotion and consumption (Low and Davenport 2009):

*‘It’s about grassroots to people, it’s about communities, it’s about the whole community, it’s not about any one part, it’s not about churches, it’s not about schools, it’s not about councils, it’s about them all coming together, so it’s that community*

*coming together to do something positive and it's about people...empowering people, through education and a sense of purpose.'*

As for the SL characteristic of **Stewardship**, Crowther considered FT from the perspective of the producer, the FTT and the consumer. To serve all three, SL **stewardship** towards the FT label became normal practice. Garstang's self-declaration as the first FTT originally challenged the marketing and campaigning paradigm being pursued by the Fairtrade Foundation. It set challenges regarding how a place could be credibly certified with the same trademark and equitable auditing process that products have gone through, and how to achieve this without damaging the equity of the FT label. Crowther accepted the key concerns of the Fairtrade Foundation that were set out in two personal letters. These were primarily related to the ability for a place to keep campaign momentum going and also increasing awareness and improving the supply and demand for FT products in that locality. Agreements were therefore set in place with Crowther and the Fairtrade Foundation that a place's ability to raise local awareness and availability of FT products in that particular locality (Lamb, 2008) would formulate the basis of the criteria to be met. From this significant event, the five goals necessary to achieve Fairtrade Town status were set (Nicholls and Opal, 2005) thus governing the **stewardship** of other activists and places wishing to follow Garstang and achieve FTT status (Alexander and Nicholls, 2006). Supporting the work of Steinrucken and Jaenichen (2007), the symbolic value of the FT label is suggested able to provide consumers with a guarantee of a **commitment to the growth of people** (producer communities) through the developmental goals of FT being carried out, for example, see the work of White and Samuel (2016). As Crowther remarked:

*'The mark is all central to this, always, for mainstreaming, and so the Fairtrade Towns movement has always been, not about promoting Fairtrade as an alternative, but about the mainstreaming of Fairtrade.'*



Crowther and the FTT movement subsequently *stewarded* those FTTs towards the promotion of FT certified goods alone. The sole agenda of promoting only products that carry the FT trademark/label is, in the main, supported and has been commended by participants for its ability to validate a standardised discourse of what Fairtrade represents:

*‘The Fairtrade Town movement is about mainstreaming, and the mark is the vehicle to do that. There can be no other vehicle, you know, if there is, tell me what it is because I don’t know anything else that can mainstream Fairtrade, it’s got to be the mark.’*

**Stewardship** through the FT label is therefore seen to serve the consumer through a reassurance that their consumption aids *the growth of people* in producer communities, whilst it is also used to serve the activist in their pursuit to *conceptualise* the positive outcomes of FT consumption when promoting it to others.

### **Emergent Theme: Exploring Affinity**

In addition to Spears ten characteristics of SL being evidenced in Crowther’s behaviour in the FTT movement, this paper finds an emergent SL theme that was deployed by Crowther to advance the promotion and consumption of FT products. ‘Exploring Affinity’ emerged from the data as an essential characteristic of the SL being researched. This not only offers a greater insight into SLship and ethical leadership in action, but it also offers a new contribution to the theory of SLship.

While Throop and Mayberry (2017) suggest that ethical leaders need to collaborate by being sensitive to the context and audiences they face, this paper finds that Crowther’s SL activities emphasise the importance of collaboration. We propose that Crowther’s leadership has ensured that FTTs drive forward their ambitions by exploring the power of ‘affinity relationships’ between people, organisations, places and the wider global society that collectively conspire to advance FT consumption. These affinity based relationships are suggested to create new

trustworthy and authentic opportunities for people, organisations and places to promote and consume FT products.

**At a meso level,** Crowther's initial *foresight* and *stewardship* that helped move the concept of an FTT into a reality (organizing the first FT meal at the restaurant in Garstang), demonstrates the first signs of a leadership trait that encourages the exploration and exploitation of affinity. The genesis of FTTs, and indeed Crowther's leadership of them, is subsequently suggested to be built upon the exploration of ways in which organizations and places can benefit from contributing to FT promotion and consumption. Crowther's leadership could subsequently be suggested to have inspired other FTTs to explore affinity with the motivation, policies, and actions of other many diverse organizations such as NGOs, schools, charities etc. For example, cafés run by the Salvation Army on the high street were sort out to serve FT coffee as it would be perceived as fitting with the overarching principles of the organization. While schools wishing to promote sustainability, and a local authority pursuing Agenda 21 policies, have also been explored for the possibility of having an affinity with the FT agenda (Peattie and Samuel, 2016), thus helping both organizations and the FT movement achieve their goals As Crowther says:

*'I was at Oxford Brooks decorated as the first Fairtrade University and I remember it actually hit me like a tonne of bricks when I was actually doing the presentation when I was talking about how many students there were and it suddenly dawned on me, how big this was. The University may have a population of say 2,000 students who would all see their university supporting Fairtrade.'*

**At a macro level,** Crowther's leadership has also facilitated face to face events that help promote an 'ethical affinity' between producers and consumers. Such affinity is suggested to have helped producers' understand the quality demands of mainstream consumers whilst it has also boosted the confidence of consumers who can at first-hand witness the developmental

outcomes of their consumption practices. In addition, it could be argued that the affinity that is developed between producer and consumer has gone some way in helping address Fergus and Gray's (2014) concern that producers have a low awareness of FT whilst also improving the authenticity of FT products and the campaigning activities of FTTs.

## **Conclusion**

This paper makes an examination of SLship in the growth and success of the Fairtrade Towns movement. In doing so it addresses the need to explore SLship beyond the boundaries of organisations, where the majority of the extant research has so far been conducted. The study advances our understanding of those factors that contribute to the growth and success of ethical consumerism and makes an important contribution to the theory of Servant Leadership.

Based upon Spears (1996) characteristics of Servant Leadership, an in-depth analysis is made of the activities of Bruce Crowther, the founder and leader of the Fairtrade Towns movement. Crowther's success leading the FTT movement appears to have drawn heavily upon several of Spears's SL characteristics. His key abilities to *listen* to consumers, producers and communities, have the *foresight* to see how various stakeholders can contribute to ethical consumption, develop and instigate a novel form of *stewardship* (including the involvement of the Fairtrade Foundation) and to *persuade* individuals and organisations to champion and consume FT products has helped millions of consumers across the globe demonstrate an *empathy* with distant others simply through their choice of consumption.

The findings of the study suggest that the success of the FTT movement is attributable to the actions of Crowther that sought to identify the mutual allegiances and needs of FT stakeholders. This behaviour is identified as an emergent dimension of SL and therefore 'Exploring Affinity' is proffered as an extension to Spears framework. Through the exploration of novel forms of affinity that stray beyond the norms of commercial relationships, Crowther's leadership has

shown that various organizations and places wish to form an affinity with movements that can help them with their quest to become more sustainable. In FTTs exploring the synergetic value of these affinities have proven vital to its success. Therefore this paper posits that SL can help explore and exploit affinity by encouraging people, movements, and organizations to collaborate and develop novel practices and policies that can help in the transition to becoming sustainable (Throop and Mayberry, 2017).

By expanding the empirical boundaries of SLship research to consider its application outside organisations and into a social setting this paper extends our understanding of SLship in practice. It also provides valuable guidance about leaders and leadership to those organisations and communities that aspire to instigate innovation in ethical consumerism. Future research should seek to confirm 'Exploring Affinity' as an attribute of other SLs particularly by confirming its existence in those leaders that operate within organisational boundaries.

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